

Rainbow Jews Transcript on 28th June 2013 with Surat Knan and Benjamin Cohen

S: Hello my name is Surat Knan and we are here at the Rainbow Jews project, and today is 28th June 2013 and we are here at the Montague Centre. I've got today Benjamin with me. Thank you Benjamin for coming, could you just tell us a bit about yourself, name, age, occupation?

B: Thank you, So I'm Benjamin Cohen, I'm 30 years old, I'm a journalist and I'm primarily working right now as a publisher on Pink News one of the UK's main gay news publications. I also campaign for same sex marriage.

S: Starting from way back, would you be able to tell us more about your family background, where you grew up?

B: I grew up in Elstree, which is in Hertfordshire just outside of London. I have two sisters both of which are younger than me and I have very normal parents. We used to go, still do go to a United synagogue. My parents are modern Orthodox, you know keep kosher in the home but would drive on a Saturday, turn lights on and off and stuff like that. I had a very conventional upbringing, going to Hebrew classes, I went to a secular school until 16 then I went to a Jewish Free School.

S: How far did, if you go back to your childhood/teenage years, how far do you think your faith background shaped your identity?

B: It very much played a part for as long as I can remember, because of Friday night dinner or going to shule on Saturday, because when I was a child we went every Saturday. That was part of the routine of life, but it wasn't about faith, it wasn't about a belief in God, although I did believe in God because I was brought up to. It was about doing things as a family, and so much of our family-life oriented around Jewish things like dinner and festivals. That was just how we spent our life.

S: Staying with those early years Benjamin, when do you feel was the breaking point in terms of your sexual identity?

B: I've written and made a radio program about this recently. I was aware of the fact that I had same sex attractions probably maybe as young as 8 or 9, around the same time I learnt the facts of life. I learned the facts of life when I was 9 but wasn't quite able to tally what I read in the book with how I felt within myself. but I was very religious, more religious than my parents and I felt the feelings I had, because they were wrong feelings, were a test from God, and what I was living through was a test, something that I would struggle with, and that was something that was very much part of my thought process when I was 13 and 14 and turned 15. But when I was 15 I made the decision to tell my mum how I felt. It's weird because she doesn't remember it very clearly, because I told her I thought I was gay. I actually said to her "would you love me no matter what", and she went through a list of things I could have done or stuff about me, and it was no, have I stolen something, there was a list of crimes and at the end it was, "oh, do you think your gay?" and I said "yes." And then to confuse her I moved schools and I told people I had same sex attractions and for some reason it made girls really like me. So I then had 2 girlfriends which confused my

mother, so I had to come out again at 21, when I was in my first proper relationship; and when I came out again not just to my mum but to my entire family the issue wasn't at all that my partner was someone of the same sex. It was that my partner wasn't Jewish. It meant they didn't have the same upbringing. For them [my parents] it was more important that their children had Jewish partners rather than the conventional heterosexual partners.

S: How was it for you when you got back to this first relationship to start out with this guy when he wasn't Jewish?

B: It wasn't a particular issue, I had had some experiences, I had gone on dates with Jewish people before, one who is a friend of mine now, who is a rabbi, but I had consciously made a decision in my head that I didn't want a Jewish boyfriend when I was maybe 19 or 20. I met my then boyfriend and we were together for 7 years. I met him when I was out. I was in Heaven and he misheard something I said to my friend and he started an argument with me. And then the inevitable happened, and we were in a stable relationship for quite some time. But it wasn't an issue, there was an issue that my then partner didn't really like doing the family thing, he came from a very broken family. He came from a very different background and couldn't understand why would you go, if you don't believe in things which I didn't at this time, why would I go to the synagogue? "Why are you doing Passover.", and he didn't like that I wouldn't let him bring pork and things into the house. So it was a point of conflict, but it wasn't until we split up really that I came into contact with the Jewish LGBT community, but I then threw myself into Gay Jewish life because I felt I'd meet people who didn't know me from my then relationship and weren't friends with my ex. I think that maybe answered your question.

S: How long ago was it that you started getting involved?

B: Its 3 years ago... and have been for the last year been in a relationship with someone who isn't Jewish, but someone who is really into all the stuff. But my own view, which might be the wrong view, I came into the Jewish LGBT community to find a boyfriend. I have a found a boyfriend now, he's not Jewish so some of the draw is no longer there. Part of the reason I went to events is to find someone. I don't need to find someone anymore so I'm coming for different reason. But it was a very great way of me, the community was a real kind of rock to get me through was quite an upsetting break up after 7 years. In a heterosexual relationship very likely you would have got married and had a child by that point and many of my friends had done that. So I felt very alone and one of the ways of meeting new people was to join Jewish LGBT because it meant you had a double affinity.

S: Are you active in any way in the Jewish LGBT community? It terms of campaigning?

B: I help, I'm on the committee for Gay Jews in London which is primarily arranged through Facebook, and I'm on the board of Keshet which is a Jewish LGBT group; I was there for its founding. ...I do a lot of campaigning but it's not specifically on the Jewish LGBT thing. Although I did last year when my old school JFS was teaching about reparative therapy and I recorded a video for the " it gets better" campaign which was about coming out and being Jewish, and why reparative therapy was wrong, and I managed to convince various influential people I know, and it got shared on social media and I managed with that and Keshet to stop reparative therapy being taught in schools. I then went on to start a campaign for same sex marriage in the UK which takes up a lot of my time, but one of the key points of

that campaign is to make it possible for people to get married in a synagogue. and it's one of the key points we campaigned for and we convinced the government that that was something they needed to change their views on. And I was able to talk to people such as Nick Clegg and David Cameron from the perspective of being Jewish and gay and single, And at that point was thinking if I met someone they might be Jewish and I would rather get married in a synagogue. As it is i don't have a Jewish boyfriend now, so it's unlikely we would get married in one unless he decided to convert but it has been a key point for me.

S: It's not secret you're quite a media personality. How much do you feel your Jewishness comes across in your work?

B: Well... I got anti Semitic hate mail when I was on channel 4 news for 6 years and I appear quite Jewish on TV I suppose. I was on "Jewish Mum of the Year" and "Jews at 10" - where Jewish people tell anecdotes, and most of mine were about Jewish LGBT life and what it's like to be gay and Jewish. But I suppose the Jewish thing is it runs through all elements of my life, I still go to Friday night dinner at a family members, or have it at my house and have friends over. While I'm not going to synagogue every Saturday i still go every Yom Tov. And I still go to the synagogue I went to as a child, and it still disagrees with LGBT rights. They had a talk by a rabbi explaining why being gay is wrong. It was very useful to have a public argument and explain the reasons why the rabbi was wrong, and not me for being gay. I do a lot of dumb things such as making a BBC show about being gay and I compared the struggles I felt to Jesus feeling abandoned on the cross. Cue the Daily Mail writing nasty stuff about me and Christian groups calling me a blasphemer. It's just something I've spent a lot of my time doing and i don't think I can separate my own personality because being Jewish is a very big part of it, but it's not about religion it's about community.

S: Can you give us a little snippet into your future, your own personal outlook?

B: I'm in a very different relationship to what I've been in before. I'm in a relationship with someone who is much younger than me, but although he's not Jewish comes from quite a similar family structure to me where family is incredibly important and the rituals related to family are similar, which meant he's adopted the family routine of my life much better than my previous partner. My personal aspirations of the future are to get married, hopefully to my partner and to have children. One thing we discussed was that if we have children would they be brought up Jewish. He doesn't really have a faith so probably they would do. I would like to have Jewish children and I would like to be quite normal. One thing that's important to me is my own personal identity and something that might be different to other people who are Jewish and LGBT or Jewish and queer is I'm very traditional, and for that reason I want a life that is very similar to that of my parents or grandparents. I don't want to have a different life, a hedonistic life, I don't want to have what people used to perceive as a gay life, so for me what I aspire to is to be in a stable monogamous relationship, having children, eventually having grandchildren. And that's important to me because part of that reason is because of Judaism, the structures and rituals that made up my childhood, and it's something I want to do with my child some day. Obviously it's not something I can see myself doing particularly soon. Obviously it's much harder for a male couple to have children than a heterosexual couples or a female couple particularly if you want to have your own children. You have to go through a surrogacy process. It's complicated and it's complicated for me because aside from being LGBT I'm also disabled as I have multiple sclerosis and it makes it harder to adopt children because of that. I want to have a normal life, that my aspiration and I think

more and more people who are LGBT especially younger people are seeing that. Being LGBT doesn't mean being different; it means being the same as everyone else and why having equal marriage is important...opening up into that institution means our relationships can be considered in the same context as heterosexual relationships and maybe that means I can be accused of being hetero-normative, but I'm probably just normal-normative and want to have a normal life for myself in the future

S: If you had to pick one item or object that you feel is closest to you, your identity who you are, some memorabilia what would that be?

B: Well there one particular thing, and I haven't been able to bring it with me today, but I've got pictures of it. It's a rainbow star of David and I bought it in the Prowler Shop in Soho, so there's no religious connotation to it. I bought it drunk on a night out, but it's been a very useful tool to me but it's on my suit, which I'm not wearing, hence why I don't have it with me today. It's always been on me when I've been meeting with politicians, when I'm meeting them to talk about same sex marriage, and it's always noticed by them. So when I hosted an event with Nick Clegg it was the first thing he said to me, " why are you wearing that rainbow star of David, what group is that from?" I said "it's not from a group but I am a member of Keshet and there are some members of Keshet here who I invited", and I used it as an opportunity to lobby him for the need for synagogues and some churches to be able to perform same sex marriage. And I would do the same thing with David Cameron because some people who see from an outside perspective wouldn't know or realise that with the Jewish community I believe that the majority of the community are ok with people being gay. Of course there are some people within the ultra-orthodox community who are not. but I think that people's views on this are changing as they come to terms that their children are gay or someone knows someone who is gay, they have a sibling who is gay or work with someone who is gay or are gay themselves. I always want to make the point that outside people might only see the more intolerant views, and I've used that as a mechanism to start a conversation to say actually I've got a rainbow star of David and that most people who are Jewish are ok [about it]. The fact that I'm LGBT and I think why I talk about that is that really our community is changing. After I had the debate with the rabbi in the synagogue, my boyfriend came for the first time the next week for Passover, and everyone there knew he was there as my boyfriend, but they were incredibly welcoming to him, but they weren't doing it in a patronising way to be like "oh aren't I great because I'm shaking hands with a gay person", they were doing it because they were pleased, whether it's my parents friends or whatever, that I was happy and also that I was there with a partner who wanted to be there themselves to learn about Judaism. And I think it demonstrates how our community has changed. I think if I had gone ten years ago with my then boyfriend I don't think we would have had such a good reception, because that was before there was civil partnership, while there was still Section 28 and there was unequal rights in employment and in goods and services, and gay couples couldn't jointly adopt, and there was no prospect of same sex marriage - certainly not being advocated by a Conservative PM. But quite a lot has changed in 10 years on a legislative basis and that's also changed the way people act and think, and I think when I look towards the future of being a gay Jew it's going to become easier and easier not harder, and as community change so too must the organisation behind them to better reflect the members behind them. It makes me feel so much different to how I used to feel about being gay and Jewish. When I was younger it felt like you had to choose one. So you could make the decision I'm gay and therefore I'm going to reject and not do these

Jewish things, and I used to do them in a very different context, and when me and my former partner were engaged - I suppose that is the right term, but we were engaged before it was even possible to have civil partnerships, but we used to wear rings and that ring symbolised our relationship to me. And we wore them on our wedding finger like a commitment ring, but when I went to the synagogue I used to take it off because I didn't want people to ask questions to say "Oh are you engaged?" or "are you married?" or something because then I wouldn't only have to say "no", I would then have to say that I was gay. It used to be that when I was doing Jewish things the ring got put into a little box and people wouldn't know, and when I was doing the gay thing the Jewish thing got put away because I didn't used to wear a star of David around my neck. I didn't really talk about the Jewish element of my life particularly when the gay thing. It's just so different now.

S: Thank you so much for sharing your story today Benjamin, just to sum up...

B: Actually there's something I should say which I forgot. I actually have a theology degree, so I've studied Judaism academically and it was through this study that I stopped believing in god, or at least a personal god. And that made my journey back into being interested in Judaism and the gay Jewish thing interesting, because I went to university to study religion and I studied all the religions and it was for the first time that I started to question my own because I sat there academically studying Islam, Christianity, Indian religious traditions, and I got to Judaism and I had to apply those same questions to the belief structure that [to the other religions] I had and I decided actually I can't believe what I used to believe. It was an interesting way of doing it, and journey to go, and I studied it because I was really interested in god. And I went there still in the closet with my mum vaguely thinking I was gay, my friends and family not knowing, and I left university not really clinging onto religion anymore and with a boyfriend and very much part of the gay community and its just interesting how things like that happen.

S: We are coming to the end of the interview. If you had one message, like from the 3rd to the 1st floor in a elevator, what would that be?

B: I suppose it would be from my own perspective, and it's such a cliché now, but it would be that it does get better. and it gets better because families are so much more accepting of being gay than they used to be, and society is, and I feel every day I live my life it becomes easier to be gay and it becomes easier to be gay and Jewish, and to try and combine both elements of your identity. And so the overall answer to your question is that it gets better and its getting better for everyone, and I think that's a great thing about our society in Britain today.

S: Thank you that was really inspiring. Thank you.